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Confidence in the Classroom

Theresa Guillory

Cedarville University, tguillory@cedarville.edu

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“Confidence in the Classroom”

by Theresa Guillory

Instructor’s Notes

In this paper, Theresa asks the question, “How can greater confidence be instilled in the writing classroom?”. What research methods did she employ to answer this question? How is her essay organized? Are you convinced her proposed solution(s) would be effective? Why or why not?

Writers’ Biography

Theresa Guillory is a sophomore nursing major from Maryland. She discovered her love for writing during the 8th grade and has written several brief devotionals, poems, and essays in her spare time. Outside of her studies, Theresa enjoys running outdoors, reading novels, cooking, and spending time with her two sisters.

Confidence in the Classroom

Audible groans filled the classroom as the professor introduced the requirements of the first writing assignment. “Each of you will compose a six-page, double-spaced essay that is due in two weeks, discussing your opinion of one of Sigmund Freud’s theories and providing a credible and persuasive argument supporting or opposing his ideas. In your composition, you must cite at least seven sources and follow MLA format, including a works cited page...” The instructor’s voice continued, but each of the thirty students in the Freshman Composition class ignored the remainder of her words and focused instead on how they would survive the impending two weeks of torture. While one part of the class began to plan trips to the library for research, another portion of the group considered creative procrastination techniques to evade the agony of writing such an essay.

Freshman student Sarah Lewis, however, sat among her bewildered peers, attempting to conceal her tearfulness and contemplating how she belonged in the writing class under the

tutelage of her Ph.D. level composition professor. Sarah had never been a strong writer and had no interest in Freud or argumentative essays. She felt out of place and isolated on her first day of class. Meanwhile, the professor continued to instruct her pupils, confident that the students would complete the course with a feeling of belonging among professional writers, unaware of Sarah's dilemma.

Sarah's predicament represents a dire problem confronting freshmen college students today. From the first moment that some freshmen students arrive in their writing classes and meet their accomplished professors, they hold the assumption that the instructors are a part of a lofty field and that they as inexperienced writers are outsiders. The freshmen's single desire is to learn a few helpful tips to improve their skills. They don't aspire to anything higher, such as becoming a part of the writing field as accomplished composers. In her research study "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing across the Curriculum," Lucille Parkinson McCarthy observes that Dave, a freshman subject of the experiment, approaches each of his writing classes with different attitudes and expectations. In his Poetry class, a course with which he is the most unfamiliar, Dave views the class from the perspective of a stranger, attempting to grasp the subject, but failing to achieve the level of poetry interpretation and composition that he desires. His final grade of a C plus reflects his incomplete comprehension of the topics in the class. In her review of the results, McCarthy states that a large part of Dave's problem rests in the fact that though this student strives to perform at a maximum level in the class, he views himself as an outsider to the material that the professor presents. This attitude affects both his social interaction with his teacher and his other activity in the course (237-250). Many freshmen students identify with Dave in their feelings of incompetence and isolation within the writing field, as their attitudes influence their performance in the course and the grades they receive.

In addition to relating to Dave's experiences, some freshman students also connect with the pupils that Gary R. Hafer describes in "Ideas in Practice: Supplemental Instruction in Freshman Composition." Hafer comments that many students entering freshman composition courses not only dread but also despise the course. This may be due to their insufficient preparation for the college level writing field in previous years of education

(par. 7). Inadequate preparation for the writing field in lower levels of education leads to freshmen's feelings of incompetence and isolation from the field of composition when they enter college writing courses.

These feelings of incompetence and isolation that freshmen writing students harbor are a grievous problem for college professors, for the students' views of the various writing arenas affect their grades and therefore reflect the professor's success or shortcomings in guiding the writing techniques of the students. Also, if college teachers don't accommodate students who feel incompetent and isolated from the field of writing, their pupils may develop negative views of them and spread their complaints, leading to unpleasant evaluations of the professors by their employers and fellow faculty members. As Hafer explains, unsuccessful instruction in composition courses may be an important cause of students' departure from college settings (par. 15). This endangers many aspects of a university, including attendance, funding and reputation. Students' departure from colleges due to ineffective writing classes therefore results in damage to both the professors' respectability and employment. Rick Evans, author of "Learning 'Schooled Literacy': The Literate Life Histories of Mainstream Student Readers and Writers," describes the disinterest in writing that many students develop in their adolescent years. These feelings of apathy may increase to the extent that students resent all writing tasks related to the academic field (319-339). Evans' observations reveal the gravity of the problem, as students' aversion to writing may emerge from thoughts of insecurity and inadequacy within the field of composition. The grave problem of some freshmen college students' low levels of performance in writing classes due to feelings of incompetence and isolation is one that college professors have the duty and ability to correct in an effective manner.

In correcting the issue of their freshmen student's feelings of incompetence and isolation within the writing field, college professors should avoid ineffective resolution strategies. One futile technique concerns separating the student who feels incompetent and isolated from his or her classmates and giving the pupil exclusive attention and assistance in developing proper writing skills. Though the professor may use this method in hopes of giving the student an added measure of comfort within the writing field, he will instead

elevate the student's feelings of incompetence in writing and isolation from his or her peers. For instance, from the scenario in the beginning of the essay, if Sarah Lewis's professor recognized her anxiety in the class and brought attention to her predicament in the presence of her classmates, the resulting humiliation would reinforce Sarah's attitudes of displacement in the composition course.

In addition to the ineffective solution of drawing harmful attention to the individual student who feels incompetent and isolated, the possible resolution strategy of accommodating uncomfortable students by permitting them to write about anything they desire is also unsuccessful. Some freshmen students entering the college level writing arena feel uneasy and inadequate due to self-concepts of incompetence in the topics of their assignments. If the professors attempt to solve this predicament by forsaking the requirements for the assignment subject matter, however, the students may take advantage of this freedom and choose oversimplified topics, neglecting to strive for excellence within the writing field. In today's culture, adolescents display indifference in various areas including writing topics that do not relate to them. Margo Guillory, a homeschooling mother, attests that a lesser social pressure on students to apply themselves in settings that are irrelevant to them exists. This leads to attitudes of entitlement among students to only write about topics that amuse or connect to them in some way (Personal interview). Thus, this strategy of allowing students to write about anything they desire doesn't resolve the situation, but instead reinforces students' attitudes of entitlement. This solution also hampers the students' academic performance, a result that opposes the teachers' initial goals for their students in writing classes.

Because of the harmful effects and insufficient results of these two possible solutions, professors should abstain from using them. Although some individuals might disagree with its effectiveness, an alternative approach is possible that involves the teachers' acts of diminishing feelings of incompetence and isolation among freshmen students in the field of composition by allowing students to view themselves as a part of the writing profession and connecting the topics of writing assignments to the students. This approach includes the use of in-class peer review workshops, professor-student revision meetings, and a limited range of assignment subjects. Its effectiveness and practicality makes this

strategy the best method for resolving low levels of performance due to attitudes of incompetence and isolation.

The use of in-class peer review workshops aids the effectiveness of the approach involving the incorporation of freshmen students as competent writers within the field of composition. When freshmen students receive the opportunity to review the writing of their peers and suggest changes, attitudes of confidence and proficiency in writing replace feelings of incompetence or isolation, as students attain an active role in the writing field. Furthermore, self-images of alienation from the writing field disappear as students operate as professionals, editing and discussing others' compositions. As a freshman in Dr. Wood's Composition course at Cedarville University, I had similar feelings of incompetence within the writing arena at the beginning of the course. Through in-class peer review sessions, however, I began to view myself as a capable individual in the writing field as I read the compositions of my classmates and proposed plausible revision strategies. A practical way to incorporate this method into teaching is by planning at least one workshop per writing assignment in the course of the semester so that students have the opportunity to edit one another's papers, yet there is a sufficient amount of additional class periods to hold lectures and perform other activities. This technique of in-class peer review workshops is a practical and effective way for professors to integrate freshmen students who feel inadequate within the writing field, along with the second component of the effective solution that encompasses professors providing opportunities for individualized conferences with their students.

The professors' use of conferences with their students in an exclusive setting adds to the success of the resolution strategy of integrating freshmen students into the writing field. As McCarthy's concludes from her experiment, part of Dave's difficulties in his poetry class result from his insufficient correspondence with his professor (256). If Dave's poetry professor had held conferences with each of his students to discuss their compositions, Dave would have felt more confident in his abilities and thus would have had a greater potential to achieve higher grades and mastery of the course. Furthermore, conferences between a professor and a student allow the teachers to explain the expectations for each writing assignment and permit students to ask questions regarding their papers on a level

that is not possible in a classroom setting. Often, freshmen students feel incompetent and isolated from the field of writing within their composition classes because they don't grasp all the requirements or facets of their assignments. Conferences with the student's writing professors help to resolve this issue by clarifying any vague components of the professor's expectations for the student's paper. Individualized conferences are also practical for professors because sessions can have a limited time allotment, thus requiring a minimal number of hours outside of the classroom. Furthermore, conferences with students demonstrate the genuine care that the professors have for their pupils, earning the esteem of adolescents, faculty members, and supervisors. This component of the solution to accommodate isolated students within the writing field serves the same purpose as the final part of the resolution strategy that involves a limited range of assignment topics.

The last portion of this successful method involves professors allowing students to choose from a limited range of assignment topics. Sarah Lewis's professor designated a specific topic for her argumentative essay, making her feel intimidated on the first day of class and cultivating her feelings of incompetence and isolation. While those who oppose this approach may prefer to choose the faulty method by allowing students to choose whichever topics they desire, the effective strategy allows teachers to select a predetermined list of relevant yet challenging topics from which the writing students can select. This technique diminishes students' feelings of entitlement and promotes self-concepts as competent writers, for students who feel inadequate in the writing field can choose a topic from the list that they feel qualified to address in their compositions. They are also able to refine their writing skills by constructing their papers to meet the expectations and goals of their professors. College writing instructors should make the assignment subject matter in their writing classes more relevant to the way students think without compromising the original academic standards of the teachers (Guillory, Personal interview). Professors can accomplish this in a practical way by first asking for their student's input as to what topics interest them such as current events that concern young adults, or history topics that motivate the writing students. They should then permit the pupils to select a topic from the list throughout the semester. Professors may even choose a

variant of this method, using a wide and pre-selected list of topics that relate to students and give them confidence at the beginning of the course, then narrowing the options and introducing new and unfamiliar assignment subjects over the course of the semester to further challenge the students and alert them of their ability to write about foreign topics with the same level of mastery in composition as with well-known subjects. Allowing students to compose papers on topics that relate to them helps to decrease freshmen student's feelings of incompetence and isolation, yet challenges the pupils to strive for excellence within the writing field.

Sarah Lewis' feelings of incompetence and isolation no longer existed as she sat in her usual place in the Freshman Composition class with the desire to pursue excellence in her writing. Over the course of the semester, Sarah's professor had guided the students through in-class peer review sessions, provided opportunities for individualized conferences with the students, and broadened the list of assignment topics to include matters that related to Sarah and her peers in the class. Sarah had lost her self-appraisal of an outsider to the field of composition. She viewed herself a member of the writing profession and would approach each of her academic writing tasks with feelings of confidence.

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